Canadian Social Science
Vol. 6, No. 6, 2010, pp. 113-118

ISSN 1712-8056 [Print]
ISSN 1923-6697[Online]
www.cscanada.net
www.cscanada.org

Delving into the Mysteries of Dickinson's "'*Nature*' *is What We See*"

ETUDES APPROFONDIES SUR LES MYSTÈRES DE "'NATURE' EST CE QUE NOUS VOYONS" DE DICKINSON

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Abstract: This article is an attempt to decipher the meaning of Emily Dickinson's poem 668 "'Nature' is what we see" by observing the different mentioned objects (used here to refer to animals, insects, natural phenomena and natural objects) and discovering patterns between the objects in each group as well as patterns that exist between the objects in each group and those in other groups to prove that the choice of these objects was not arbitrary but rather deliberate. Dickinson, as proven in this reading of the poem, tries to reflect the diversity of nature through her choice of the objects she lists in her poem.
Keywords: Dickinson the would-be scientist; Natural Diversity; Poem 668

Résumé: Cet article est une tentative de déchiffrer le sens du poème 668 d'Emily Dickinson - "'Nature' est ce que nous voyons", en observant les différents objets mentionnés (utilisés ici pour désigner les animaux, les insectes, les phénomènes naturels et les objets naturels) et découvrant les modèles entre les objets dans chaque groupe, et ceux qui existent dans d'autres groupes afin de prouver que le choix de ces objets n'est pas arbitraire, mais plutôt délibéré. Dickinson, comme le démontre dans cette lecture du poème, tente de refléter la diversité de la nature à travers son choix des objets qu'elle énumère dans son poème.
Mots-clés: Dickinson le soi-disant scientifique; diversité naturelle; Poème 668

668
"Nature" is what we see—
The Hill—the Afternoon—
Squirrel—Eclipse—the Bumble bee—
Nay—Nature is Heaven—
Nature is what we hear—
The Bobolink—the Sea—
Thunder—the Cricket—
Nay—Nature is Harmony—
Nature is what we know—

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*Received 3 August 2010; accepted 28 September 2010

Yet have no art to say—
So impotent Our Wisdom is
To her Simplicity

(Dickinson in Gottesman, 2371)

Reading the poetry of Emily Dickinson generates the feeling that one is cracking the pieces of a puzzle or trying to understand mathematical equations. Sharon Cameron observes what she calls "metonymic equations" that "serve as links between the poet's interior world and the external phenomenon taking place" (Cameron, 27 in White). White argues that Dickinson's poems follow "the paradigms X <is> Y, X <has> Y, or X <does> Y." and cites the initial line of poem 668 "`Nature' <is> what we see" as an example (White). The critic strives to comprehend what the poet and would-be scientist tries to communicate through her poetry which is preoccupied with scientific issues. Fred White argues that "[m]ore than 200 of her [Dickinson's] poems touch on scientific themes" (White). He argues that "the struggle between certainty and uncertainty … is central to Dickinson's poetic vision", and that she "uses poetry to perform … experiments in language, her counterpart to scientific experiments" that she uses "for apprehending essential Truth" (White).

Indeed, Dickinson is quite sophisticated in her unconventional method of writing. Dickinson's first editors, have, according to Mitchell "regularized her 'idiosyncrasies' of grammar, punctuation, meter, and rhyme" (Mitchell, 705). Some critics suggest that dashes in her poetry "may have been used systematically for rhetorical emphasis or musical pointing" (Gottesman, 2351). Further, Thomas Johnson claims that dashes are used "as a musical device" (Johnson, x-xi; 92). Using dashes, I believe, serves to compartmentalize these objects and place them in a virtual scale for the sake of closely examining them through comparison and contrast. Dashes also reflect the timelessness and infinity of nature since nature is a "Destroyer and preserver" (L.14) (Kermode, 447) to use Shelley's words in "Ode to the West Wind".

The complexity that arises in dealing with Dickinson's poetry is partially due to the indeterminacy, uncertainty, and mystery that shroud her seemingly simple poetry. John Schmit examines syntax in Dickinson's poetry and the techniques of elision and insertion through which Dickinson "creates indeterminacy" (Schmit, 106). The "indeterminacy" creates mystery in return. Hence, Pinsker Sanford notes that Dickinson's "poetry is wedded to mystery" (Sanford), and Richard Sewall also maintains that Dickinson's "mind [is] marked by a tendency towards the 're-mystified' (Sewall, 24). Thus, the critic should be wise enough not to settle for the surface meaning of Dickinson's poems, but rather, to engage in a process of decoding what is cleverly coded in the simple language of a poet who is bent on "mystifying" her language.

Poem 668 "'Nature' is what we see" is a case in point. I believe that the first few readings of the poem fail to give the reader a feeling of any connection between the elements mentioned in the poem. The simplicity of the poem initially blocks the chances of seeking further meaning or a search for a connection between the different 'objects' (used henceforth to refer to animals, insects, natural phenomena and natural objects) mentioned in the poem. One takes for granted the initial meaning he/she gets through his/her reading of a simple though complicated, dense and mysterious poem. However, there are many questions that come to mind when attempting to reach an understanding of the deliberately mystified poem. Such questions include: "Why did Dickinson choose these objects in particular? Was the choice deliberate or arbitrary? Why are certain words capitalized? Why does she use dashes? Is there a pattern or a link between the objects mentioned in each group? Is there a pattern between the objects mentioned in each group and those in other groups?" One starts finding links and patterns and finding possible answers to these questions when he/she closely examines the characteristics of the different objects mentioned in the poem.

According to Dickinson, nature is what we see such as the hill, the afternoon, the Squirrel, the Eclipse, and the Bumble bee. An examination of the attributes of each of these objects will reveal interesting results. To begin with, the hill can be described as being big, a concave image, static, relatively lasting, mute, a source of subjective feeling in the viewer, solid, tangible, and earthly. In contrast, the afternoon can be described as being mobile, temporal, mute, a source of subjective feeling in the viewer, intangible, celestial, and associated with light (sun). The sun represents "creative energy; law in nature; consciousness [thinking, enlightenment, wisdom, spiritual vision]; father principle, … passage of time and life" (Guerin, 158). Notice that the first object (the hill) is earthly whereas the second one (afternoon) is celestial. The hill is

static whereas the afternoon is dynamic. The hill is relatively lasting whereas the afternoon is temporal. The hill is tangible whereas the afternoon is not. Both objects however are mute and the emotion they invoke in the viewer is subjective.

On the other hand, the squirrel is small, dynamic, covered with fur, has a sound, tangible, usually generates a positive feeling in the viewer, and earthly. The squirrel is smaller than the hill, dynamic like the afternoon, and tangible like the hill. The eclipse is dynamic like the squirrel and the afternoon. It is celestial like the afternoon but is associated with darkness rather than light. It generates a scary feeling in the viewer unlike the aforementioned objects; it is mute like the hill and the afternoon but is intangible like the afternoon. In contrast, the Bumble bee is smaller than the squirrel and the hill, dynamic like the squirrel, the afternoon, and the eclipse. It is hairy, has a fainter sound than the squirrel's, less scary than the eclipse yet is tangible unlike the eclipse, and is earthly-celestial as it can fly.

In the first group of tangible objects (hill, squirrel, the bumble bee), one can notice a pattern that relates to size; there is a movement from big to small to smaller. Whereas in the group of intangible objects (the afternoon, eclipse), one can notice a movement from light to darkness, from positive feelings to negative scary feelings. One can also notice a movement from earthly objects to celestial ones. The last object mentioned (bumble bee) becomes the link between the earth and the sky – a link that prepares for the reference to "Heaven" as the second definition of nature. Comparing nature to Heaven suggests the paradise-like peaceful and perfect condition of nature – an aspect that is found in the thoughts of Deists and Transcendentalists which influenced Dickinson as shall be explained later.

In her third definition of Nature, Dickinson defines it as "what we hear" such as the Bobolink, the Sea, Thunder, and the Cricket. The Bobolink, a migratory dynamic song bird that is covered with feathers, is smaller than the hill and the squirrel but is bigger than the bumble bee. It has a sound that is stronger than the bumble bee's and possibly weaker than the squirrel's. Its sound generates a positive feeling in the listener, and it is tangible, and earthly-celestial like the bumble bee. As for the sea, it is big. In fact, the sea is the biggest mentioned tangible object so far. It is weird that the poet chose to classify the sea under objects we hear rather than objects we see despite its massive size. Probably, Dickinson is aware of the near impossibility of hearing the waves of the sea without mentally picturing the sea. Further the assonance between the words "sea" and "see" serves to make the connection between the hearing the sea and visualizing it inseparable.

When comparing the sea to the afternoon, one finds a pattern that links the conscious (sun) with the unconscious (sea) and the father principle (sun) with the mother principle (sea). These objects also reflect the spiritual mystery which characterizes the relationship between humans and their creator. They also reveal the contradictory feeling of timelessness and eternity and the destructive passage of time and life. Dickinson's poetry is also "concerned with the paradoxes and dilemmas of the self that is conscious of being trapped in time" (Gottesman, 2350) – a matter that is also evident in this poem since Dickinson reflects this contradictory state of Time as eternal and temporal.

The sea is "the mother of all life; spiritual mystery and infinity; death and rebirth; timelessness and eternity; the unconscious" (Guerin, 158). The sea is static like the hill yet relatively dynamic. Like the hill, it is relatively lasting, and generates a subjective feeling in the viewer or listener. It is also tangible and earthly. The sea, however, is different from the hill because it has a sound and is fluid. The sea might also serve as a connection between the sky and the earth since it reflects the color of the sky. Both hill and sea are concave images that suggest death-and-rebirth according to Freudian psychology because they are interpreted "as female or womb symbols" (Guerin, P.128). But what type of death-and-rebirth does the poet target here? Is she suggesting that understanding nature by contemplating it leads to a death-and-rebirth experience?

I doubt that this probability would be found unlikely because of Dickinson's religious beliefs which were influenced by Deism and transcendentalism. Anna Wells states that Dickinson "seems to have absorbed something of the spirit of Transcendentalism" (Wells, 245). Banzer also maintains that Dickinson contemplates "Essence", through the context of "oneness of being" (Banzer, 417) which is found in Transcendentalism, and that she conducts a "simultaneous analysis of earth and eternity" (Banzer, 433). Patrick D. Murphy further maintains that nature is "vital for the process of psychic healing", and it "becomes crucial as a means for self-understanding" (Murphy, P.29). Similarly, Dickinson tries to understand herself, the relationship between humans (herself in particular) and God, and to prove the

presence of God through his works in Nature like Deists do, or like a transcendentalist who tries to become one with God through contemplating nature. More to the point, White claims that "Dickinson had almost certainly fallen under the spell of the naturalist and Christian mystic Edward Hitchcock" who maintains that a "close study of nature was a way of coming to know God" (White). If such knowledge of or unity with God is obtained, then there is no doubt that one would undergo a death-and-rebirth experience.

Thunder, the next mentioned object, has the loudest sound of all objects mentioned in the poem. One can notice a pattern of voice level which ranges from the faint sound of the bumble bee, to that of the bobolink, the squirrel, the sea, and then thunder at the top end of the scale. There is also a pattern of scary sounds versus positive sounds. The sound of thunder is associated with darkness and fear just like the eclipse, whereas the sounds of the bumble bee, the squirrel, the bobolink are associated with light. Thunder is intangible and celestial like the afternoon, eclipse, and Heaven. In contrast to thunder's loud sound, the cricket's sound is quite faint. The cricket is associated with peacefulness since we can only hear its faint sound, fainter than the bobolink's, in a peaceful serene night.

Again, one can notice a pattern of sound level in the poem; from weak sounds (squirrel, bumble bee, bobolink) to strong sounds (thunder), then back to weak sounds (cricket). There is also a pattern of light/day sounds (squirrel, bumble bee, bobolink) to dark/night sounds (cricket, thunder). Though thunder can occur during daytime but the sky would be darkened by the clouds that generate the thunder. It is also important to notice that the cricket is the smallest mentioned object on the scale so far. The cricket, is nocturnal and therefore associated with darkness whereas the bumble bee, the bobolink, and the squirrel are associated with light since they are active during day time. The cricket is tangible, dynamic, and earthly. It can hop as if it is trying to reach the sky just like a squirrel climbs tall trees as if it is trying to do the same. Murphy explains that "just as the self enters into language and the use of *parole*, so too does the other enter into language and have the potential, as does any entity, to become a 'speaking subject,'" (Murphy, P.9). Nature, thus, becomes an 'Otherness' that Dickinson tries to understand. It is as if Nature tries to speak to her through the aforementioned objects which humans "hear".

The poet, then, defines nature as "Harmony" with a capital H for emphasis supposing that the poem is published in the form Dickinson intended, for as William Matchett explains "Dickinson's poems offer textual problems comparable in the complexity to those offered by Shakespeare's plays—and for the same reason: the author did not oversee their printing" (Matchett, 92). Harmony occurs when there is a concord of sounds. Indeed one can notice the harmonic pattern of strong sounds versus weak ones, scary sounds versus those that generate a happy feeling, and dark related sounds versus light related ones.

There is one more pattern that one can also find in this poem. We have weak objects in contrast to strong ones. The squirrel is physically stronger than the bobolink, and the bumble bee is stronger than the cricket. The sea has so much strength whereas the hill does not have any physical strength despite its size. Size seems sometimes to generate force whereas at others it fails to do so. One can also notice a pattern of colors; the color of the sea is different from that of the bumble bee, or the bobolink's or the squirrel's color. There are also light colors (bumble bee, bobolink) versus the dark colors of the cricket or the Eclipse, for instance. These objects reflect the diversity in nature in terms of colors. According to Ynestra King "A healthy, balanced ecosystem, including human and nonhuman inhabitants, must maintain diversity" (King, P. 119 in Murphy, P.6). In fact, Dickinson's nature has a "healthy" and "balanced ecosystem" because of its diversity which is reflected in the entire poem; big objects versus small ones, loud sounds versus weak/faint sounds, dynamic objects versus static ones, fluids versus solids, scary objects versus beautiful amusing ones, tangible objects versus intangible ones, temporal versus eternal, earthly versus celestial, visual objects versus auditory ones, etc.

The poet then concludes that nature is inexpressible. Although everyone knows what nature is, words fall short before the task of explaining it. Nature is simple yet, nevertheless, it is a hidden mystery, and human wisdom is incapable of understanding it. Despite the many attempts to define nature through the senses (what we see, what we hear), through abstract notions (what we know), through emotions (nature is harmony), and through metaphysics (nature is heaven), the task still seems impossible and Dickinson eventually concludes that nature remains inexpressible. "Our Wisdom", capitalized for emphasis, is

"impotent" when it comes to understanding nature despite its "Simplicity", also capitalized for emphasis.[2] Despite the simplicity of nature, it remains a mystery containing many secrets and hidden knowledge – a matter that renders nature similar to Dickinson's poem 668 "'Nature' is what we see" which contains, despite it simplicity, many secrets and hidden knowledge which were hopefully uncovered by this article.

According to Magdalena Zapedowska, "Hitchcock combined science, natural observation, and theology" to prove that "the organization of nature provides solid evidence of the existence of God and that all natural processes are emblems of spiritual reality" (Zapedowska, 382). The mystery that surrounds nature must have troubled Dickinson, since she uses nature to ascertain the presence of God as Hitchcock taught her. Thus, the mystery that shrouds nature leads to a wavering belief in God. Consequently, "the project of natural theology fails the test of empirical observation and thus cannot nourish wavering belief" (Zapedowska, 382).

More to the point, Dickinson life was characterized by alienation which is a "requisite" condition of Nature writing according to Patrick D. Murphy who explains that "alienation from the object of attention" which is nature in this case, and "alienation within the authorial subject" which is Dickinson's inability to reach an understanding of herself or God for that matter, "appear requisite conditions" of nature writing (Murphy, P.31). Christopher Benfey maintains that Dickinson's secluded life style is "a form of religious challenge, either in hatred of a God she could not entirely deny or in paradoxical service to Him she doubted" (Benfey, 119). In fact, critics often characterize Dickinson's poetry with skepticism and blasphemy. "Her insistence in keeping whole the fragile membrane of her inviolate self made complete submission to God or man, nature or society impossible for Emily Dickinson" (Gottesman, 2349). One almost can feel the frustration that the would-be scientist feels for having failed to reach a solid piece of evidence that would put her troubled mind at ease regarding the matter of the presence of God.

Dickinson's choice of the objects in this poem is not random or arbitrary. They are carefully chosen because they reflect nature's diversity, and because they share certain characteristics and exemplify a pattern that exists in nature. The focus on the diversity of nature and the patterns one discovers between the aforementioned objects in each group and those in other groups render Dickinson's poem one about ecology because "Ecology as a discipline means, fundamentally, the study of the environment in its interanimating relationships, its change and conservation, with humanity recognized as a part of the planetary ecosystem" (Murphy, P.4). Ecology is also "a study of interrelationship, place, and function, with its bedrock the recognition of the distinction between things-in-themselves and things-for-us" (Murphy, P.4). According to Murphy, "the recognition of the difference between things-in-themselves and things-for-us, and the corollary of us-as-things-for-others leads directly into feminisms, particularly in their interrogation of gender" (Murphy, P.4).

In other words, Dickinson, through her examination of nature in this poem, is actually conducting an *ecofeminist* analysis of nature. Ecofeminism as a field, "explicitly" intertwines "the terrains of female/male and nature/humanity, which have been artificially separated by philosophical linearity for far too long" (Murphy, P.7). Dickinson tries to understand herself, Nature, and God through her examination of what she sees/hears/knows in and about Nature as if in her nature writing she is reproducing "the absolutes of Enlightenment belief in the power of science over art, observation over imagination, and human systematization and ordering over any indeterminable structures of natural process" (Murphy, P.33). In effect, Nature writing, as Ed Hoagland maintains, "despite its basis in science, usually rings with rhapsody as well—a belief that nature is an expression of God" (Murphy, P.36). Studying nature, then, becomes a way of understanding, knowing, and communicating with God – a matter that Dickinson was struggling to do by understanding the "difference" between "things-in-themselves" (aforementioned objects in the poem) and "things-for-us" (what they mean to Dickinson and how they allow her to understand herself and God).

Hopefully, the analysis presented in this poem unraveled the hidden patters in this poem and revealed the secrets in nature that are echoed in this poem. Yet, the poem remains open for analysis and probably hiding more secrets. In the final analysis, Dickinson's words fall short before the task of describing nature just like human knowledge falls short before fully understanding it. Dickinson successfully makes her poem echo the state of nature through indeterminism, uncertainty and mystery.

[2] Dickinson sometimes uses capitalization for emphasis and to reveal strength as in "Heaven", "Thunder", "Simplicity" or "Sea", whereas sometimes she uses it ironically as in "Cricket" and "Our Wisdom".

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